Urban Design & Civil Protest

Photo: Tali Hatuka

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Urban Design and Civil Protest

Compton Gallery, MIT Museum, Cambridge, Februray 2008

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PREFACE

Why view social movements in a spatial or design context? How can an understanding of space as both a material and social construct generate new insights into the meaning, nature, and impacts of social protest? What new questions will emerge about the meaning and relevance of physical spaces once we see and hear the divergent choreographies of social protest -- whether in terms of voice, boundaries, or appropriation – that have inhabited those spatial terrains? This aurally and visually experimental exhibit by Tali Hatuka begins to answer these questions by presenting a range of materials from sound and video installations to architectural models and photographs that together show how and why social protest is more than political opposition or an expression of citizen grievance. Social protests are physical and political performances that unfold in and on certain "stages," whose very essence will build on the ways that territorial locations have been designed or can be appropriated, represented, or re-arranged to embody power and its discontents, and whose long-term impact can change the meanings of place and space.

With its central focus on social protest, this exhibit raises questions of citizenship, political participation, collective identity, and state power. Yet its visual and acoustic displays also generate curiosity about the individuals involved, about the phenomenology of their actions, and about their motivations as participants. In the study of social movements, scholars have been divided over which of these vantage points lends most insight into the character, form, and meaning of social protest. There are those whose starting points are political structures and processes, and those who see social movements as a form of collective citizen response to "opportunities" for action that present themselves differentially over time and space. An open plaza could be one such "opportunity." Scholars taking this perspective, among whom the sociologist Charles Tilly towers as a leading intellectual, focus their attention on changed conditions that make protest more likely, such as a responsive political party coming to power or a government weakened by crisis, as well as on the social or political resources that can further motivate citizens to join together in collective protest. In this view of social movements, changes in the state and formal structures of power matter greatly, as do the resources available to citizens to promote their cause and to encourage others to join them.

But there is another school of thought associated with the eminent European sociologist Alain Touraine that looks more closely at the motivations and conditions of individual protesters, at the cultural and identity politics that unite

them with other like-minded folks, and at the subjective frames of social action that promote citizen solidarity and generate mobilization as a response to deep personal dissatisfaction with social exclusion, injustice, and other forms of political or cultural disenfranchisement. In the real world of protest, both perspectives shed considerable light on collective action. But when posed singularly, each offers only a partial view of the multiple forces and conditions that generate citizen mobilization. Sometimes the proclivity to see social movements as **either** the rational response to changed political opportunities and resources, **or** as an essentialist expression of citizens' feelings or cultural identities, will stand in the way of a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the ways that social protests actually unfold in time and place. One only need look more carefully at specific locations, and avoid the grand theories that sociologists are wont to manufacture, in order to see how and why it is possible for citizens to respond to genuine identity concerns while also tapping into political institutions, structures, and "opportunities" for action that emanate from powers beyond their grasp.

If we recognize that both citizen attitudes and larger political structures of power are key ingredients in the social construction of protest, the task becomes to find a methodological approach that brings both citizen and the state into the theoretical equation. In my own work I have found that social movements and other forms of citizen protest are often a response to a sense of real and perceived distance from the state, particularly if distance from the state is defined in cultural, geographic, social class, and institutional terms. To understand these dynamics, I have argued that we must understand "the power of distance"[1]and how it can engender social protest or collective action. This approach, which moves beyond more conventional theories of social movements by building its claim around a more nuanced appreciation of spatiality, builds on the premise that "location directly influences the formation, objectives, and strategies of citizens as individuals and collectively in social movements"[2]. Space, or the setting in which people live and act, establishes parameters on action even as it interacts with social forces, structures, and conditions to construct that action. And precisely because some citizens or groups of citizens are more distanced from the state than others, "it is the extent of citizens' distance from the state that explains their likelihood of joining social movements, the strategies they are likely to pursue, the meaning they attribute to movements' activism, and even the identities enshrined in these collective actions"[3].

However, it is also true that social protest is about engagement, not just distance. In this sense, social protest should be understood -- in phenomenological terms at least -- as the act of seeking to bridge the distance between citizens and the state, with protest serving simultaneously as a form of opposition and engagement. The concept of a bridge, defined by the Random House Unabridged Dictionary as a structure that spans or provides passage over

a chasm, also has a second meaning, as “a connecting, transitional, or intermediate route or phase between two adjacent elements, activities, conditions, or the like.” Both of these definitions rely on concepts and ideas drawn from the design world and the study of space, even as they lend insight into life in the social world where connections and bridges within and between different actors are in fact the basis for mobilization and successful social change.

If engagement and distance are what social protest is all about, then this exhibit takes up the definitional challenge and moves it one step further by introducing new methodologies and techniques for unpacking the engagement-distance nexus through the study of specific physical locations. At its core, “Urban Design and Civil Protest” is a celebration of disciplinary boundary-crossing that makes recognizable the epistemological value of seeing social protest as something produced by citizens in their everyday actions, who are opposing yet also engaging the state, but doing so in a delimited space. By integrating design studies and visual arts into the social and political sciences, the exhibit’s aim is to make evident the phenomenological underpinnings of protest as both a social and spatial construct, and to give the viewer a sense of the interactive social and physical context in which most social protests unfold. By building the core of the exhibition around a closer examination of the design and collective action dynamics that give rise to voice, as well as how they interface with the “acoustic politics of space” to define boundaries and inspire appropriation, we see how the physical form of protest spaces can either enable or constrain the nature and impact of civil disobedience, as well as the actions of the state. We see how protest locations can be differentially understood both from within (e.g. by its users) and without (e.g. by the state). Such physical and social patterns, which define many of the social protests presented here, remind us that even when citizens and the state have different agendas, their combined impact in and on space is highly legible to themselves and others. This is why the study of space is so important, both for advancing our knowledge of social protests, and for understanding who we are and the ways we are socially and politically engaging, or not, with others.

Diane E. Davis
Professor and Head, International Development Group
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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1 Diane E. Davis, “The Power of Distance: Re-theorizing social movements in Latin America.” *Theory and Society* 28 (1999): 585-638.
2 Ibid, p.601.
3 Ibid

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

-**Elie Wiesel**

URBAN DESIGN AND CIVIL PROTEST: A SOCIO-SPATIAL LABORATORY

What makes citizens choose a particular form of protest? How does space function as mediator between these citizens and their political acts? Whose power and control drive negotiations between citizens and regimes during protests?

Addressing these questions, this exhibition offers a window into how people use, manipulate, claim, and appropriate urban space while advocating for their own values. It should be noted that the exhibit looks at these issues in a socio-spatial context, without any consideration of moral and political narratives.

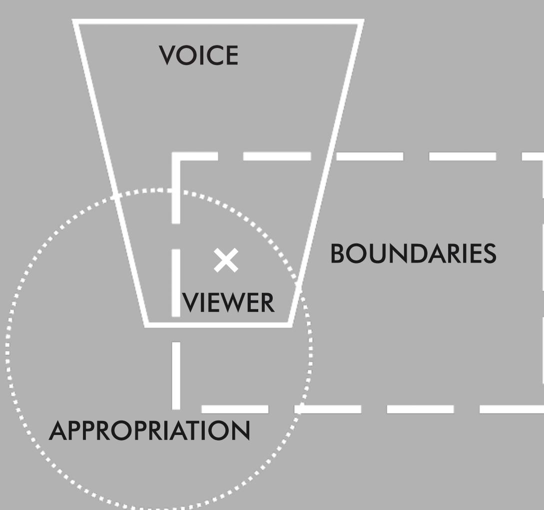
Complementing existing architectural and planning theories that explore the role of built spaces in constructing national identity, the exhibition investigates urban spaces as cultural artifacts within intricate power geometries. The visualization of citizens using urban landscape during protests, as offered by this exhibit, teaches us about the socio-political meaning of space. This act of "concretizing" the differences and similarities of protests through sound and image sheds light on the way practices of both citizens and governments are manifested in, and negotiated through, space. In other words, in the framework of this exhibit, urban space is seen as a strategic instrument through which participants choose to confront each other.

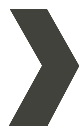
As a laboratory for examining the socio-spatial dynamics of protest, the exhibition looks at the relationship between three themes: **Boundaries, Voice,** and **Appropriation**, as the key interrelated elements of protest, which become its **Spatial Choreography**. These themes are investigated, both separately and in relation to one another, as abstractions that re-position space as an actor in the discourse of protest.

VOICE is oppositional consciousness in a system of domination.

APPROPRIATION is the practice of protestors and officials "possessing" space, whether private or public.

BOUNDARIES are the physical enclosures and social rules that define a group.





THE SPATIAL CHOREOGRAPHY OF PROTEST

Spatial choreography of protest is an intricate juxtaposition between people – through voice and appropriation of space -- and space itself.

The concept of spatial choreography is offered here to reveal how space and people interact during protests, exposing the way in which the design of protests helps participants achieve their goals. This design is designated by boundaries, location, scale, form, symbols, use of voice, and social norms -- all of which contribute to the protest's spatial order.

The protest takes place within physical space that represents the civic identity of that society. Some of these characteristics are temporarily modified by barriers, blocked routes, and adjusted traffic rules to control the crowd's movement. In addition, police attempt to maintain control through different types of surveillance, such as cameras and secret agents in a crowd, to remain alert to any forms of violence that might occur.

The protest's ritual performance components (i.e. marching, gathering, singing, etc), clothing, and schedule (i.e. timing and length of the event) reveal the way participants see themselves, either as supporters of, or protesters against, the social order. Thus, this spatial choreography has a dual role: it is a mechanism for constructing meaning and interpreting social reality, and a device for negotiation between the state and the citizen.

VOICE

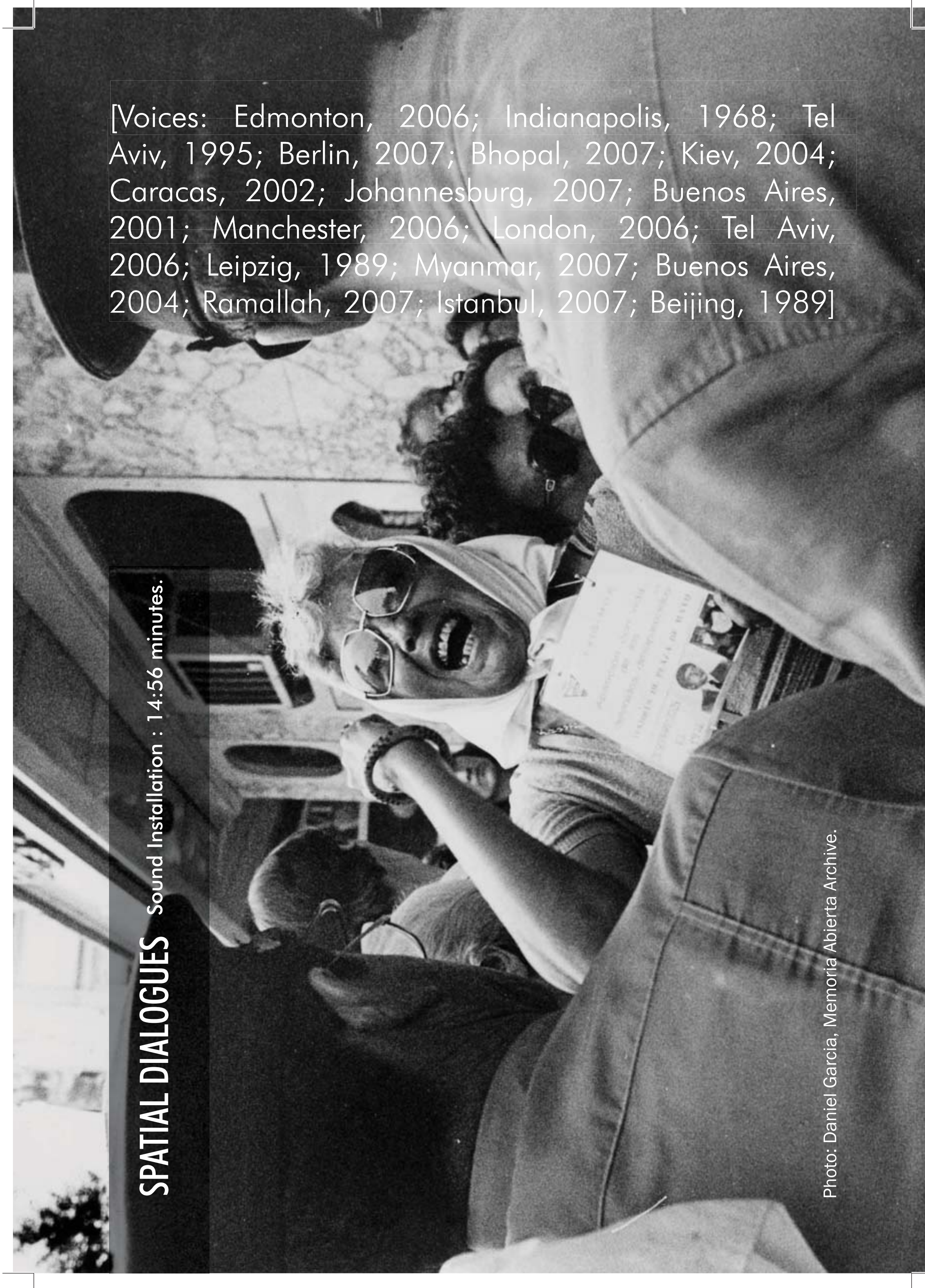
Voice is defined here as the expression and embodiment of oppositional consciousness in a system of domination. Oppositional consciousness fosters a sense of efficacy and promotes the belief that acting collectivity can bring about change. Thus, any expression of voice or oppositional consciousness requires four givens: identifying with an unjustly subordinated group, recognizing the injustice of that group's position, opposing that injustice, and identifying common interests to end the injustice. A perception of these injustices is the first step to collective action. Oral protest and signage – banners, posters, ads, etc. – are the tangible representations and linguistic strategies of oppositional consciousness.

In this exhibit, particular attention is given to spatial "dialogues," conceived as a form of communication between citizens and regimes, often with regimes as invisible participants controlling events through surveillance. The dialogue between the regime – even when physically absent as participants-- and citizens – who are physically and politically present, offers a unique social phenomenon that informs us about the relationship between civil action and space.

SPATIAL DIALOGUES

The sound installation illuminates the way these spatial dialogues alter space and create two key typologies of communication: a static form taking place in one location, and an active form taking place in motion, through the city. Public gatherings require different voices that, in their occupation of space, freely use and play with these typologies to create the desired effect.

Within this notion of spatial dialogue is a wide spectrum of voices: passive, obedient, humorous, sarcastic, poignant, angry, sad, contemptuous, etc. These different voices, "performed" in both formal and informal places, expose the variety of linguistic strategies of communication between citizens and regimes – again, without presenting a moral or political agenda.



[Voices: Edmonton, 2006; Indianapolis, 1968; Tel Aviv, 1995; Berlin, 2007; Bhopal, 2007; Kiev, 2004; Caracas, 2002; Johannesburg, 2007; Buenos Aires, 2001; Manchester, 2006; London, 2006; Tel Aviv, 2006; Leipzig, 1989; Myanmar, 2007; Buenos Aires, 2004; Ramallah, 2007; Istanbul, 2007; Beijing, 1989]

SPATIAL DIALOGUES Sound Installation : 14:56 minutes.

Photo: Daniel Garcia, Memoria Abierta Archive.

Photo: Tali Hatuka

Verdad
Justicia
Memoria
Madres de Plaza de Mayo
Línea Fundadora
WAR KILLS
Einigkeit
25 Jahre friedliche Revolution,
und Recht
Fall der Mauer,
und Freiheit
deutsche Einheit
Wir Fordern Freie Wahlen
Battle of the

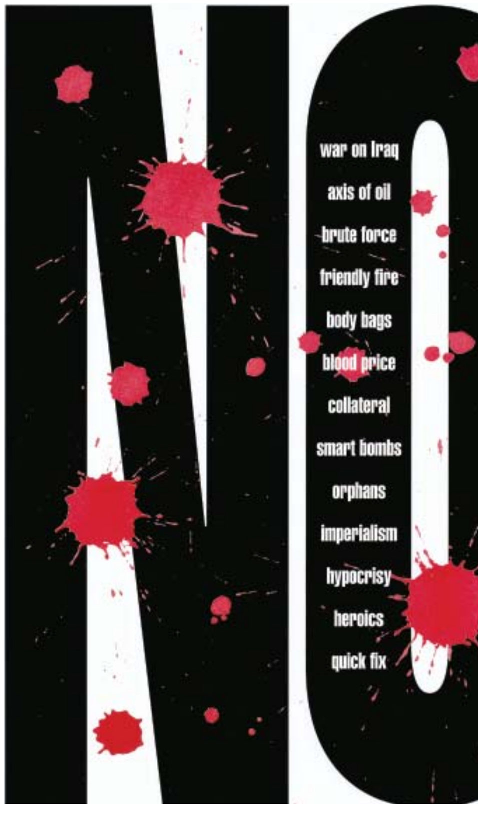

NO
war on Iraq
axis of oil
brute force
friendly fire
body bags
blood price
collateral
smart bombs
orphans
imperialism
hypocrisy
heroics
quick fix

Photo: Tali Hatuka

Photo: Yair Gil, www.yairgil.com

Photo: Tali Hatuka

Photo: Cengiz Kahraman Collection

Photo: Tunney Lee, Rotch Visual Collections, MIT

APPROPRIATION

The practice of "possessing" space, even temporarily, whether private or public, is **Appropriation**. This act of possession challenges the established social order identified in, or with, a particular space. Because civic squares represent the power of the regime through architectural aesthetics and symbols, they are the most notable demonstrations of this phenomenon of appropriation. In other words, appropriation, especially in civic squares, challenges rules, laws and social codes that govern that space.

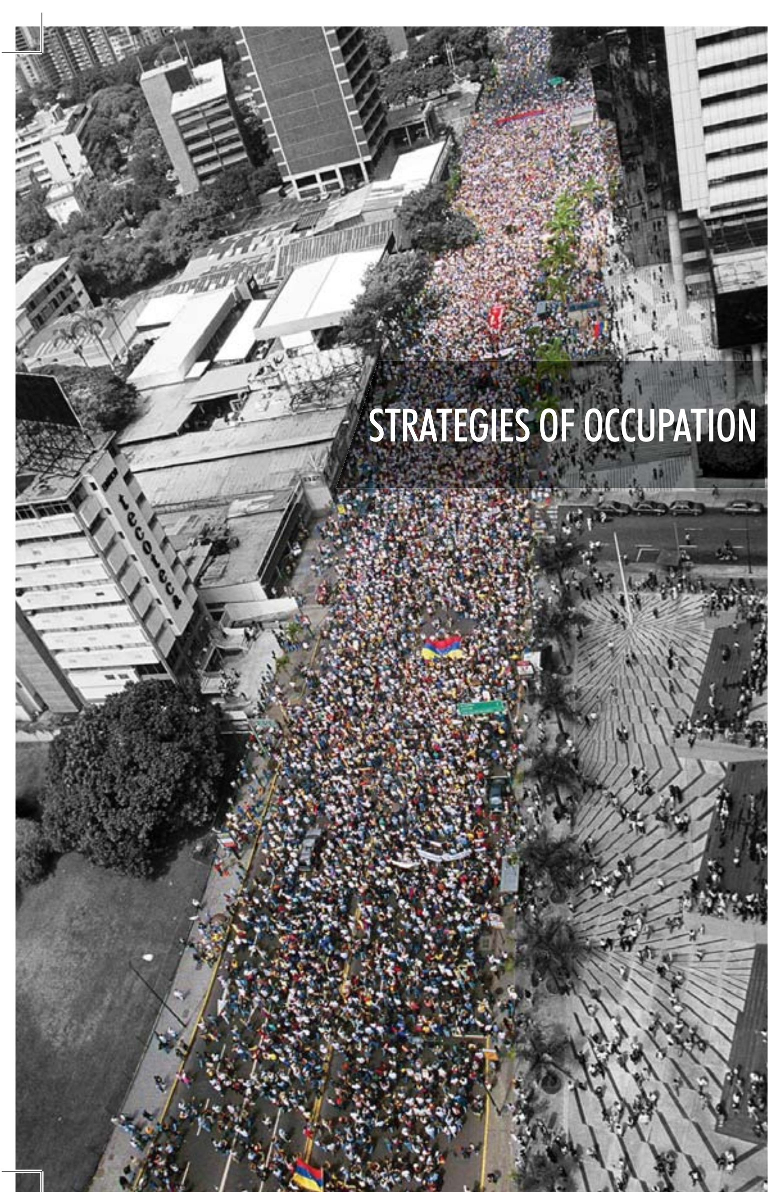
The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, marching in circles around the monument in the plaza, perform a repetitive ritual that redefines access to, and the appearance and representation of, urban space. This act reclaims the space and thus modifies its cultural meaning. Similarly, Israeli "Women in Black" temporarily appropriate "informal public spaces" throughout Israel every Friday afternoon. These relatively small groups decide their own spatial configuration and performance acts. In the case of large assemblies, the powers (i.e. political parties, institutions) often choose to maintain control and order by actually collaborating with activists through a careful selection of spaces of a certain size, scale, and orientation.

PENGON/Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign   Tunney Lee, Rotch Visual Collection, MIT   Tali Hatuka

These highly controlled gatherings offer a benefit to participants because their scale enhances the crowd's experience of togetherness and solidarity, which in turn intensifies their impact. However, when the highly controlled gathering veers off its agreed course (in terms of scale, patterns of movement, with intervention of the state or other uninvited persons, etc.) violence can erupt.

In terms of the regime's control, modern technology and surveillance are the most effective means. However, surveillance and enforced order may be resisted through socio-political agencies, as in the case of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, etc. In other words, what is at first conceived as a means of control can also serve as a means of liberation and mediation.

Sandra Bracho. Archivo El Nacional   Yair Gil, www.yairgil.com   Tali Hatuka



STRATEGIES OF OCCUPATION

Video Installation: 4:58 Minutes

Inside this exhibit space, a video installation examines the way strategies of appropriation advance (or fail to advance) oppositional consciousness. It captures the different ways that crowds occupy space and might also be controlled by representatives of the regime during protest. Whether these small or large-scale protests end in violence, arousal, or indifference, the video shows how public occupation of space modifies our socio-spatial perceptions.

Photo: Ernesto Morgado, Archivo El Nacional

Photo: Stadtgeschichtliches Museum, Leipzig

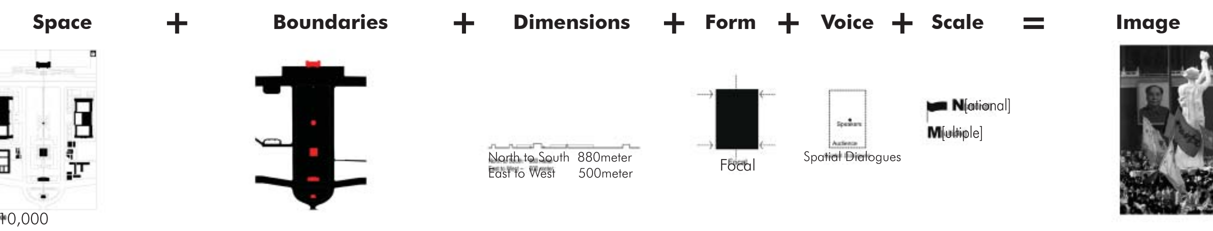
BOUNDARIES

The word **Boundaries** has three associations: spatial, social and conceptual, including just/unjust, oppression/liberation, and so forth. These physical, social and conceptual boundaries influence the design and performance of protests, also determining the resonance of voice and the character of spatial appropriation.

Acknowledging the varied practices of communication and notions of citizenship in today's multicultural world, an array of cubical kiosks exposes the settings of specific protests from the 1960s on. These kiosks, jammed with photographs, books and documents, illuminate the differences and similarities of protests' scales (local, national, international), forms (the repertoire of occupying space, linear, circular, focal) and types of events (singular, repetitive, etc). These different types of protests reflect both the diversity of urban space and the quality of space in terms of organization and planning, underscoring the ways in which urban space is used as the main actor in the social and visual production of protests.

Tiān'ānmén Guǎngchǎng, **Beijing** June 4, 1989

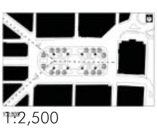
The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 were demonstrations led by labor activists, students, and intellectuals in the People's Republic of China (PRC) between April 15 and June 4 of that year. Participants were generally critical of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, demanding democracy and the establishment of broader civic freedoms. The demonstrations centered on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, but large-scale protests also occurred in cities throughout China. The resulting military crackdown on the protesters in Beijing by the PRC government left many civilians dead or injured. Protests also occurred in cities throughout China, including Shanghai, which stayed peaceful throughout the protests



Plaza De Mayo, **Buenos Aires** August 31, 2006

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is an association of Argentine mothers whose children “disappeared” under the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. For over three decades, the Mothers have fought for the right to re-unite with their abducted children. Since April 30, 1977 until the present day, they gather every Thursday afternoon in Plaza de Mayo, in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace, for a walk around the plaza. On January 26, 2006, members of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo Association made their final annual March of Resistance around the Plaza de Mayo, chanting “no more!,” such marches are needed because they do not perceive the current government as hostile or indifferent to the fate of the Dirty War missing. Their weekly Thursday marches will continue, however, in pursuit of action on other social causes.

Space + **Boundaries** + **Dimensions** + **Form** + **Voice** + **Scale** = **Image**



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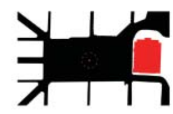
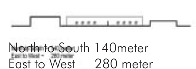
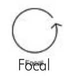
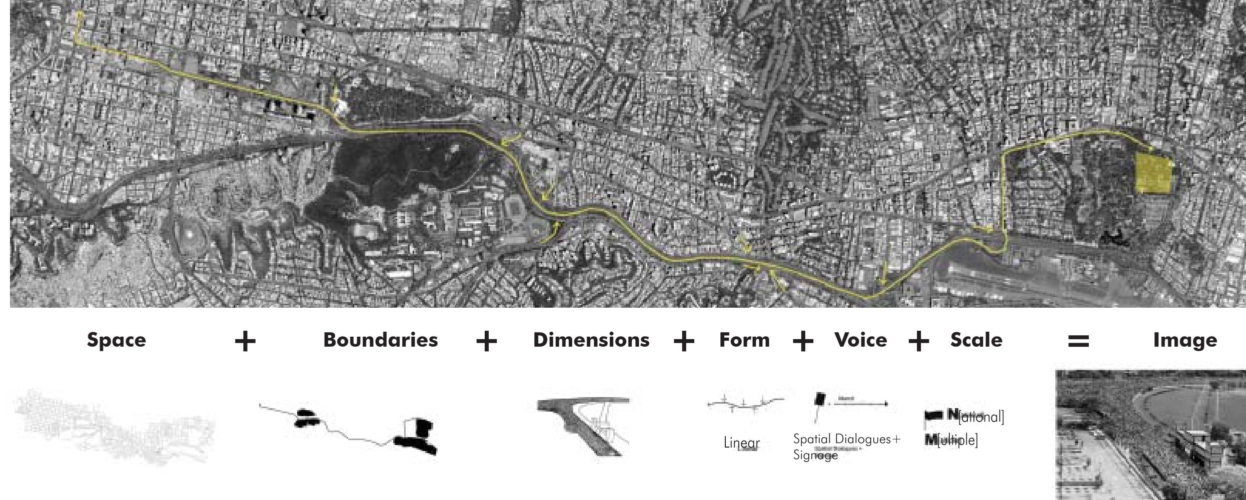






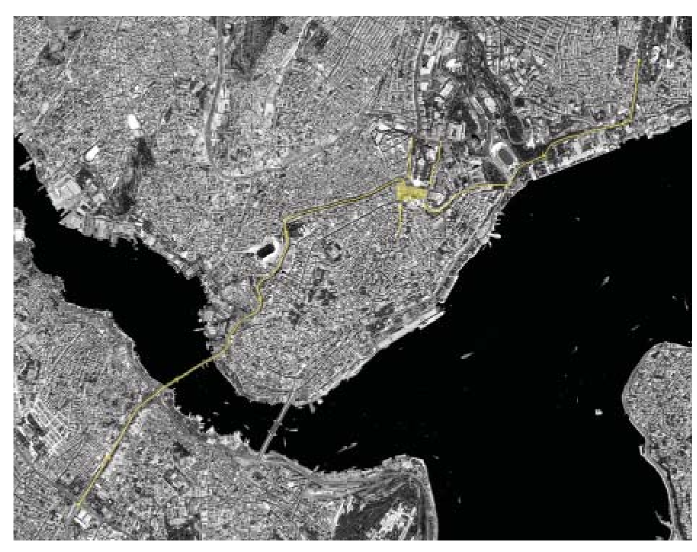
Autopista Franciso Fajardo, **Caracas** April 11, 2002

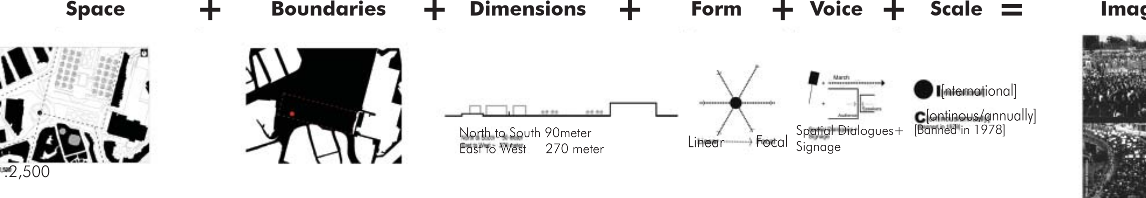
On April 9, 2002, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV) — the country's largest trade-union federation, traditionally affiliated with the opposition Democratic Action (Acción Democrática), called for a two-day strike. Two days later, amid rapidly escalating tensions, an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people marched to the PDVSA headquarters in defense of its recently-dismissed management board. Unexpectedly, the organizers decided to re-route the march to Miraflores, the presidential palace, where a pro-Chávez demonstration was taking place. Supporters and opponents of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez clashed at the Miraflores Palace. According to BBC News, a sector of the Armed Forces asked for Chávez's resignation, holding him responsible for a massacre during the demonstrations. Chávez was taken to a military base while Fedecámaras president Pedro Carmona was appointed as the transitional President of Venezuela, following mass protests and a general strike by his opponents. Carmona's first decree reversed the major social and economic policies that comprised Chávez's "Bolivarian Revolution," and dissolved both the National Assembly and the Venezuelan judiciary, while reverting the nation's name back to República de Venezuela. Carmona's regime was toppled, and Chávez resumed his presidency on the night of Saturday, April 13, 2002.



Taksim Meydani , **Istanbul** May 1, 1977

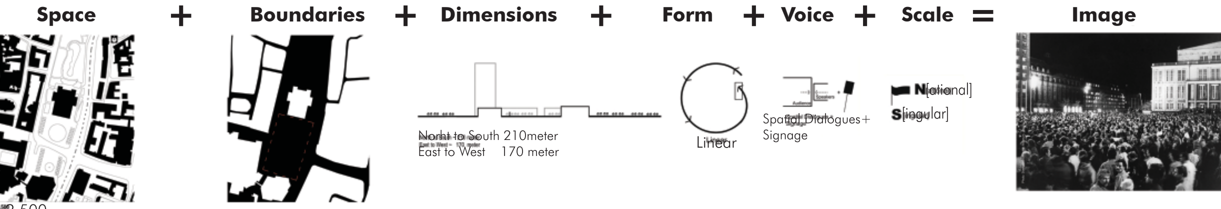
The May 1st demonstration was organized by the Revolutionary Confederation Workers' (DISK). Thousands assembled to celebrate that day, by the end of which many were killed in the chaos that ensued. The assailants who claimed the lives of 34 people and hundreds of casualties were not (and still haven't been) identified. Yet this fact did not deter equally large crowds from showing up again in 1978. However, in the following year, in 1979, a massive May Day demonstration was prevented by imposing a curfew on the city and stationing a regiment of soldiers in the square. May Day celebrations in the square were banned until recently.





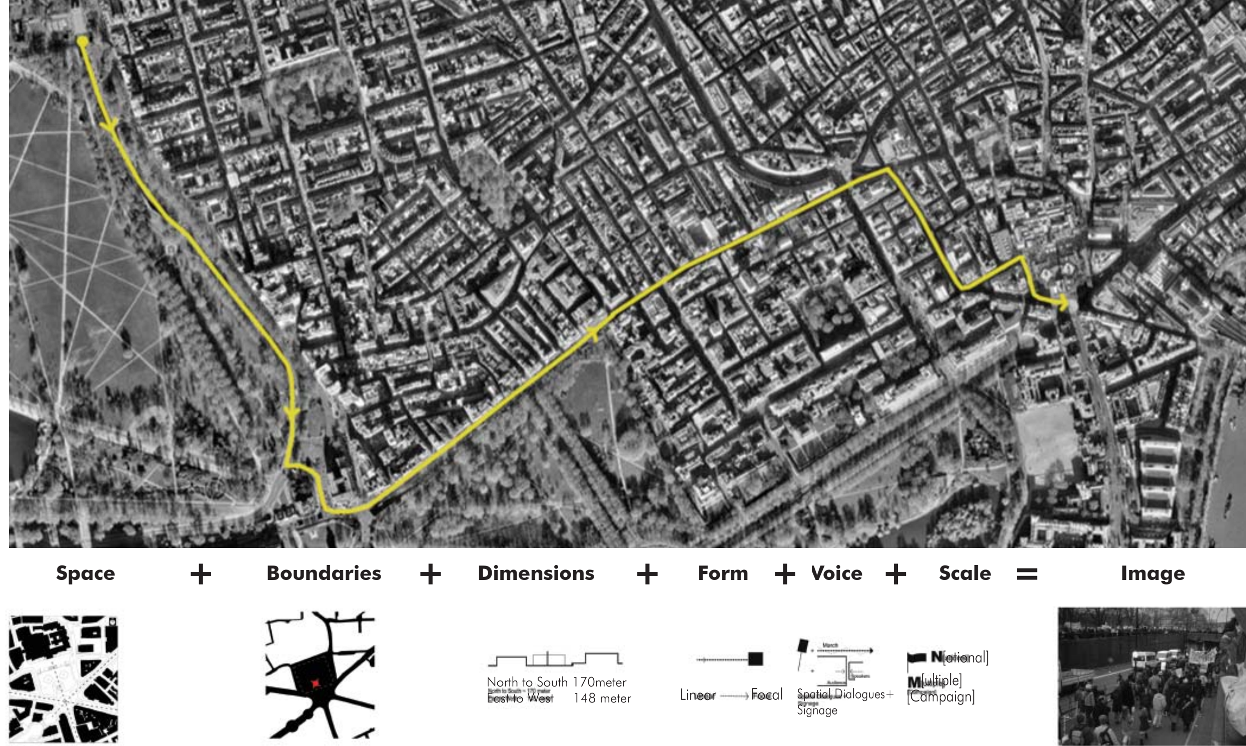
Augustus Platz, **Leipzig** October 9, 1989

Monday demonstrations were a series of peaceful political protests against the socialist government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) of East Germany that took place every Monday evening. The demonstrations began on September 4, 1989 in Leipzig after regular prayers for peace in the Nikolai Church, and eventually filled the nearby downtown Karl Marx Square (today known again as Augustus Platz). Informed by (West German) television and friends about the events, people in other East German cities began repeating the Leipzig demonstration, meeting at city squares on Monday evenings. By October 9, 1989, just after the 40th anniversary celebrations of the GDR, what had begun as a few hundred gatherers at the Nikolai Church had swelled to more than 70,000, all united in peaceful opposition to the regime. That day East Germany also saw demonstrations in Dresden, Halle, Lindow Magdeburg. The next week, in Leipzig on October 16, 1989, 120,000 showed up, with military units again held on stand-by in the vicinity. The next week, the number more than doubled to 320,000, proving that the majority of the population opposed the regime. This pressure led to the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, marking the imminent fall of the socialist GDR regime.



Trafalgar Square, London February 24, 2007

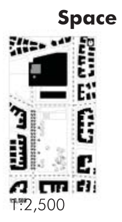
Thousands of people took part in a London march calling for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq. The rally, organized by Stop the War Coalition (SWC), was supported by CND and the British Muslim Initiative. According to organizers, some 60,000 joined the march from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square. Metropolitan Police put the figure at 10,000. Protesters also warned the government against attacking Iran and opposed the replacement for the Trident nuclear missile system.

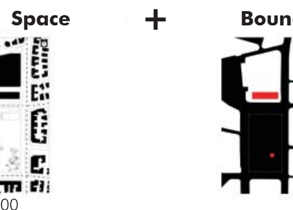


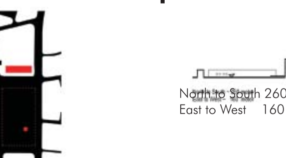
Kikar Rabin, **Tel Aviv** November 4, 1995

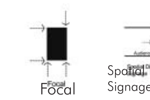
On November 4th, 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated during the "Yes to Peace, No to Violence" Rally in support of the Oslo Accords. The Oslo Accords were agreements between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (the PLO), representing the Palestinians in 1993 as part of a peace process officially called the Declaration of Principles. Thousands of youngsters in the Square waved banners, calling in Hebrew and Arabic for peace. After the assembly, the Prime Minister went down the service stairs and was shot in the back by a young religious Jew. He was rushed to the hospital. At 11.14 p.m., his death was announced.

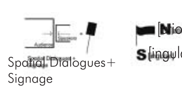
Space + **Boundaries** + **Dimensions** + **Form** + **Voice** + **Scale** = **Image**





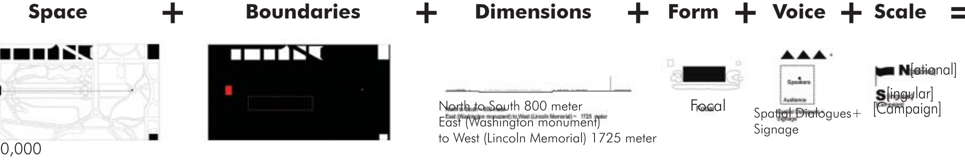






National Mall, **Washington D.C.** May 13 – June 24, 1968,

In 1967, one in seven Americans lived in poverty. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) embarked on a so-called Poor People's Campaign to bring attention to the nation's neediest people by staging a march in Washington, D.C. In the midst of organizing the march, on April 4, 1968, Marin Luther King was assassinated. The SCLC pressed forward with the Poor People's Campaign just weeks later, settling people on the National Mall in an encampment they called "Resurrection City." Jesse Jackson led protesters in direct actions around the city; however, the protest failed after heavy rains and unclear agendas bogged down the participants. In the midst of the protest, word came that presidential candidate Robert Kennedy had been assassinated in California. Soon afterwards, Resurrection City was shut down.



Image

Worldwide, February 15, 2003

The February 15, 2003 anti-war protest was a coordinated day of protests across the world against the imminent invasion of Iraq. Millions of people protested in approximately 800 cities around the world. The February 15 international protests were unprecedented, not only in terms of the size of the demonstrations but also in terms of the international coordination involved. The day was carefully planned by an international network of national social movement organizations.

Photo: Tali Hatuka

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